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## **Leading or managing? Assistant Regional Directors, School Performance, in Queensland**

### **Introduction**

The past twenty years have seen the rise in educational measurement of educational outcomes in many countries, including Australia. The changing landscape of education policy through National Assessment Plan Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) aligns with the global outcome based approaches such as *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS), the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) and the OECD's Programme for *International Student Assessment* (PISA) (Biesta, 2009; see also OECD, 2013). The national focus on outcomes has meant much focus has been placed on school principals to bring about improvements in student learning. Yet, research and writing has pointed to supervisors of principals as being key players within system leadership (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). Depending on the jurisdiction and country, supervisors of principals are given different titles ranging from executive leaders to superintendents to directors. As an example, they are called "district superintendents" in the US, "superintendents" in Denmark and Poland (Nir, 2014), and in Queensland, Australia, "Assistant Regional Directors – School Performance". In discussing Victoria and Western Australia, Gurr, Clarke, Drysdale and Wildy (2014) maintain there is no equivalent role to the "superintendent" since the role and function has been distributed in both State education systems. Yet, these authors concede that the current role of "regional director" in both Victoria and Western Australia shares some common ground with the role position of superintendent. Common to these differently named roles across Australia and internationally is a formal monitoring function of school principals. As Nir (2014) argues, what makes

the superintendent role differ across countries and within them is the degree of regulation (i.e. control) these system leaders are expected to enforce.

Research and writing has underscored the significant impact supervisors of principals can have on the performance of school principals. For example, the US based researchers, Marzano and Waters (2009) found “that when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected” (Marzano and Waters, 2009, p. 5). The findings of Marzano and Waters resonate strongly with other researchers in the field, notably Shideman (2008), Hough (2011) and Roberts (2010) regarding the positive impact superintendents can have on principal and school performance. Central to their research is the important role supervisors of principals play in leading effective schools. The current study is concerned with the position of Assistant Regional Directors – School Performance - a position that was established in 2010 in Queensland to provide supervision to principals.

In Queensland public schools the attempt to raise standards was manifested in the Masters Report: *A shared challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools* (Masters, 2009). Commissioned by the Queensland Government of the day, and strongly reflective of neo-liberal influences, Masters defined school accountabilities for performance in terms of students’ performance in the NAPLAN test and focused these school accountabilities on the principal. The corporate, managerialist approach to leading education is clearly evident as principals are required to establish “benchmarks for improvement and design an explicit strategic improvement agenda to achieve the intended targets” (DET, 2011, p.3).

To date, much of the research on executive leaders, superintendents or regional directors has come from the United States and the United Kingdom and very little has been carried out in Australia. For this reason, a study that focuses on this cohort is both timely and important given that the position is one that was recently created. This study, then, reports on interviews with 18 Assistant Regional Directors – School Performance (ARDs-SP) and two of their supervisors in order to gauge a better understanding of how they perceive the role and how they enact leadership. The first part of this paper

provides a background discussion on the wider context of global education reform and then explores school and principal performance in the Queensland context.

### **Global Education Reform Movement**

The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2011) unifies national, regional, and state education policies by integrating and harmonising them amongst global trends. According to Sahlberg (2011), the global education reform movement has drawn upon three key trends and these include the shift to cognitive and constructivist approaches in teaching and learning; guaranteed effective learning for all as demanded by the public; and test-based accountability as the means to raise school performance and the quality of student education.

The standardisation of educational and pedagogical processes through the introduction of performance standards is the most visible consequence of the global education reform movement. Market-like education service inspired by notions of efficiency, productivity and responsiveness supplanted professional autonomy, and delivered uniformity and standardisation rather than quality and diversity as promised (Sahlberg, 2011). As Ravitch (2011) observes, school reform in the US is high stakes testing, as “whatever could not be measured did not count” (p.21). Darling Hammond (2010) notes that school reform is based on the notion of “a lack of effort” and that standards and tests would enable others to “target punishments to those who fail to meet them” (p. 73).

Ravitch (2011) and Darling- Hammond’s (2010) studies observe that standards and tests are a means to measure performance, to determine lack of motivation and effort and to punish those who fail to reach the set targets. Elsewhere, too, education is centralised, top-down and test-driven (Kimber and Ehrich, 2011; Wrigley, 2012). The positive side of standardisation is a renewed focus on student-learning, improved quality and equity, however, it has also brought a market-like logic and market-like processes to education opening the way for corporate-style reform (Kimber and Ehrich, 2011; Ravitch, 2011) or corporatisation of education.

Borrowing frameworks, ideas, and copying policy, particularly from England and the US has led many countries, including Australia, to embrace standards as a central and dominant metaphor of educational reform (Barber, 2001; Louden and Wildy, 1999; Wildy, Pepper, and Guanzhong, 2011). In the US, standards engaged as accountability for performance are an instrument of policy, disconnected from investment in human resource rather than being instrumental in building capacity (Elmore, 2007, cited in Watterston and Caldwell, 2011). For Australian public school leaders, educational standards are at the heart of performance assessment and represent detailed expectations of what is considered preferred practice for principals, teachers, and students. As an example, a national set of professional standards for school principals called *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* was introduced in Australia in 2011. It articulates what principals need to understand and do in order to achieve excellence in their work (AITSL, 2011). Education systems and sectors across Australia are using this standard in a number of ways including performance and development, induction, and strategic planning (AITSL, 2011). While this standard was originally designed to be a content rather than performance standard, it is now being used as a performance standard (Dinham, Collarbone, Evans and Mackay, 2013). It seems that through benchmarking and comparison, performance standards provide new forms of regulation and control as well as professional upgrading (e.g. promotion) and sanctions for school leaders.

Biesta (2009, p. 34) believes that measurement culture has had a “profound impact” at all levels of educational practice. This measurement culture is reflected in Queensland’s adoption of a test-based accountability system similar to other PISA countries (Elmore, 2008) with the national testing regime through NAPLAN (National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy). This testing is rooted in the assumption that principals along with teachers can improve test-score performances in their schools. In other words, managerial accountability produces performance. The limitations to this argument have been well documented and the body of work is growing (see for example, Caldwell and Harris, 2008; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2010; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009; Harris,

2010, 2011; Kimber and Ehrich, 2011; Ravitch, 2011; Sahlberg, 2011). Among the many concerns are the lack of validity of the outcome measure (NAPLAN) and its distance from the daily complexities of teaching and learning and the de-motivation of low performing schools (principal, staff, students and community) (Møller, 2009).

A central concern is that public school principals who are able to successfully engage with the test-based accountability system (NAPLAN) use it to compete for resources and build the capacity of their school which is not to say that students or community are the beneficiaries (Elmore, 2008; Kimber and Ehrich, 2011). In an education system of finite resources and in an environment of competition and choice, this is most likely to be at the expense of other public schools (Kimber and Ehrich, 2011). Drawing on Elmore (2008, p. 37) such measures to build a policy of accountability are ineffective in the absence of school improvement focused on knowledge because these require “a substantial investment in human capital aimed at developing the practice of school improvement in a diverse population of school leaders” (p. 39).

### **School and principal performance: Queensland context**

Queensland public school principals’ performance as interpreted through the *School Performance Profile* has been accompanied by the refrain *improvement is not an option, only the rate of improvement*. The *School Performance Profile* is the primary data set and point of reference employed by supervisors when monitoring Queensland public schools. Principals must answer questions about what has happened within their area of responsibility (their school) and provide an account of practice; what has happened (or not) and why it has (or has not) happened. Within Education Queensland the answers are evaluated by the principal’s supervisor against an expectation of improvement or performance achievement established at higher levels of the education system, which means that principal’s accountability is located within the hierarchical practices of EQ bureaucracy (Møller, 2009). The *School Performance Profile* has a strong focus on school outcome

measures in reference to student learning and teachers' work and principals' efforts are concentrated on raising test scores.

Holding schools accountable for results means holding principals accountable for results too, and, as has been seen across the last few decades, the accountability focus on schools has shifted from educational inputs and processes to a focus on measureable outcomes for students (Kimber and Ehrich, 2011; Møller, 2009). It means that principals and their supervisors are held accountable for producing improvement in student learning outcomes and that the view of improved performance is linked to data generated about student and school performance on high-stakes testing (e.g. NAPLAN). Test scores for NAPLAN are used as evidence for how well Australian states are performing at the aggregate level and therefore the performance of the nation as a whole, hence local school performance is increasingly construed as national performance held against a background of international and global expectations of success.

The national testing focus risks ignoring one of the three central purposes of public education, namely the 'democratic equality' purpose which aims to achieve a vigorous and competent citizenry by preparing students for an active role in a democratic society. The national testing focus privileges social efficiency and social mobility (economic rewards) as the private purposes of education (Cranston, *et al.*, 2010; Starratt, 2004) seeing at best education as individual-entrepreneurialism and little more than preparation for the work force. Educationalists (see Goldspink, 2007; Kimber and Ehrich, 2011; Ravitch, 2011) have argued that many valued aims and objectives of education cannot be captured within narrow conceptions of education predicated on national student performance testing. Curiosity, creativity, and teamwork for example, are beyond test measurement (such as Australia's NAPLAN) and external control by education systems. Moreover a preoccupation with national testing (outcomes) may distract attention from the adequate provision of a comprehensive and holistic education for every Australian child in every school such as highly skilled and qualified teachers, high-quality instructional materials, facilities and a safe and supportive school environment.

These conditions have great impact at the local level, can vary to a great extent, and are in many ways beyond the individual public school principal's control but are the crucial domain of senior executive leaders of the system (Hopkins, 2008).

What has been identified in the literature is a lack of reciprocity in test-based accountability systems, in other words, in the hope of genuine school improvement, standards must specify the resources and conditions required to support teachers, students and community in order that they can produce the learning outcomes students are expected to achieve (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006; Møller, 2009). It has been argued that only when current school accountability systems provide full and transparent measures of the conditions and learning opportunities at the level of every classroom (Bloxham, 2013) *and* valid measures of student learning (for example see Wu, 2010, p. 24; see also Wu, 2011) can policy makers and observers judge whether school inputs and processes as well as outcomes are meeting or exceeding expectations and in turn accurately contextualise a principal's performance.

Within the Queensland state bureaucracy, a select group of 20 Assistant Regional Directors provide for "transparent supervision" of a given number of principals, and the teaching and learning performance of their schools (DET, 2011, p.3). The number of principals allocated to each ARD-SP varies on the size, complexity and workload associated with each principal's school but is averaged at between 60 and 65. This role was created at the end of 2010 and carried out by the first group of ARDs-SP in 2011. Former iterations of the position were known as District Director (DD), Executive Director, Schools (EDS), and Executive Director, School Improvement (EDSI). All of these roles had a broad agenda of corporate responsibilities that included curriculum, facilities, staffing, professional development and crisis management. Information can be gained about the ARD-SP role from the Executive Capabilities Framework (ECF, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2007) and the Principal Supervision Capability Development (PSCD) (DET, 2011) document. The former articulates the capabilities of executive officers such as ARDs-SP and indicates that their role is to



drive the government's DET agenda by enacting policies and decisions, maintaining performance based relationships, being politically aware, sharing the vision, building commitment from others and connecting with other agencies. The discourse of corporate managerialism can be found in each capability dimension of the ECF. Managerial control and the manager's right to manage are well-established as is the focus on performance criteria and resource management (Briggs, 2004; Wright, 2001). It is clear that the focus of the agenda is the school principal.

The Principal Supervision and Capability Development (PSCD) (DET, 2011) document states under the title of supervision, that EQ principals will be supervised by the ARD-SP who will focus on "individualised strategies to improve school performance" (p.3) ensuring all principals:

- Understand DET expectations
- Establish benchmarks for improvement
- Establish school improvement strategies
- Identify areas for growth and sources of support and
- Monitor performance outcomes (DET 2011, p.3)

The over-riding view of supervision within this document is one of accountability, performance, and outcomes with little attention provided to the growth or development of principals. Yet previous iterations of the position have highlighted the dual role of principals' supervisors to ensure accountability and foster growth. Writers in the field of supervision (see Sergiovanni and Starratt, 1993; Walkley, 1998) maintain that supervision consists of two key equally important components: accountability and development.

## **Methodology**

The methodology that guided this study was a qualitative case study. Case studies are appropriate to use when a study focuses on persons, events, or programs (Patton, 1990). In this study,

a case study of executive leadership, in particular, a bounded system of a group of executive leaders (ARD-SP) of DET, Queensland, constituted the individual case.

A common way to conduct case studies is via qualitative inquiry (Stake, 2005). Qualitative research designs are those whose features include investigating meaning in real world conditions; representing the views of participants; inclusive of a participant context; add to the field of knowledge that explains human behaviour; and seeks to employ multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2011). Regarding Yin's latter point, two sources of data were used in this study and these include semi-structured interviews with participants and document analysis. Interviews are an important source of research data for case studies since they enable explorations into human affairs or events and capture perceptions and attitudes (Yin, 2011). Documents were used to augment the interviews. In particular, policy documents, departmental reports and other types of documents pertaining to the role of the ARD-SP position in Queensland were consulted. The selection and recruitment of 18 from the total cohort of 20 ARDs-SP as research participants and data sources for this study was 'purposive' due to the nature of the position they held (May, 1997).

A possible reason to explain the large number of ARD-SP participants in this study could be due to the Deputy Director General (DDG) and Assistant Director General's interest in the data about the ARD-SP role and analysis of this data. The researcher as principal and DET employee may also have had a positive influence on ARD-SP confidence in the research and the researcher. Additionally, the DDG, a direct-line manager and supervisor to the executive leaders and the ADG-SP, a coordinator, facilitator, and guide to the ARD-SP role, formed part of the participant sample for the study. The decision was made to interview these two executive leaders because they were architects of the ARD-SP role. Because there is a limited number of qualified candidates for this study (Yin, 2009) the status of the participants can be construed as *élite* subjects (Beamer, 2002; Kezar, 2003).

Both sets of participants were asked to reflect on the role of the ARD-SP. Key questions asked of ARD-SPs included:

What is the rationale of the ARD-SP role in Education Queensland?

Does leadership fit into the role of ARD-SP?

How would you describe your approach to the ARD-SP role?

What are some of the challenges in your ARD-SP role?

What has been your greatest success in your ARD-SP role?

What Education Queensland training and support have you received for this role?

Interviews were conducted by one of the researchers of this paper face-to-face with participants at their work location and via telephone and video-conference. The duration of the interviews varied from between 30 – 90 minutes. In order to develop trust with the participants, part of the interview was given over to building rapport and making the participants feel comfortable with the interview process. With participant permission, all interviews were audio-recorded, independently transcribed and provided to participants for review and amendment before any analysis was undertaken. All participants were assured of confidentiality in the storage, analysis and write up of the data. Thus, individual participants were coded as Participant [1], Participant [2], etc. Places or people referred to by participants were coded also. For example, School [A], School [B], Principal [1], Principal [2], etc. DET confidentiality around specific school data, known as the *School Performance Profile*, and concerns for principal and school community anonymity placed this performance data beyond the scope of the research.

The study worked inductively, beginning with the data and systematically raising the conceptual level of analysis via the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A number of coding techniques were employed to code and then analyse the data. Coding was considered as two phases (Charmaz, 2006). The first phase of coding involved the close reading of the

raw data (interview transcripts) sifting out the “data scraps” (Glesne, 2006, p. 153) word by word, line by line searching for analytic ideas. The second phase sorted, integrated and synthesised the salient categories which were frequent and/or significant and were used to frame the data incisively. Three key themes were isolated as these became apparent through the salient categories that emerged from the data. These are now discussed.

## Findings

The three key themes that emerged from the data included a focus on improved school and student performance; supervision of principals that will lead to improved school performance; and professional challenges within the role.

### *Performance*

The current role, ARD-SP, was viewed by all participants as deviating from earlier iterations of the role. For example, Participant 9 bore this out when they said: the former role “*stretched across a range of functions, [and was] not able to create efficiencies*” and similarly Participant 1 indicated the former role was a blend of “*developmental projects, as well as a mix of HR issues, as well as curriculum issues.*” Participant 19 referred to the current iteration of the role as “*directly aligned to the need for the agency to lift performance state wide and for us to play a critical role in delivering that.*” One of the senior executives stated, “*many of our Principals have been very distracted in the past,*” implying the new ARD-SP role would focus principals’ work on an improvement agenda.

Further evidence of the shift in the view of the principal’s role and the concomitant narrowing of the ARD-SP role as principals’ supervisor can be found in the document *United in our pursuit of excellence* (Queensland Government, 2011) which articulates EQ’s new Agenda for improvement 2011-2015; an agenda that, as Participant 9 expressed, “*shapes my work in every way.*” Participants acknowledged that improvement, via test scores, was the core agenda and that for some participants it was presented by them to principals as not negotiable. As Participant 11 put it, “*good is not good*

*enough ... improvement is not negotiable, [however] the rate of improvement is certainly negotiable based on your context,”* and Participant 19 commented *“improvement is the given, it’s just the rate of improvement that’s negotiable.”*

Another important organisational change with implications for the ARD-SP role has been the creation, introduction, and refinement of the *School Performance Profile*. The document encompasses a variety of systemic data much of which are targeted towards the teaching and learning performance of the school and the students’ academic performance. The document is a key artefact in the ARD-SP – principal performance conversation, establishing the system’s view of the expectations regarding performance of the school and other issues pertaining to supervision, support, and interventions by ARDs-SP to target the principal’s performance. As noted by Participant 16, *“that [School Performance Profile] is what has become the main tracking device that we’ll work with principals on.”*

Examination of the findings related to the first theme suggests that the ARD-SP role is more finely focused on and targeted to the performance of schools and principals than previous iterations of the role. It is also apparent that the systems improvement agenda is clearly defined, tightly aligned, and rigorously prosecuted through the use of corporate data presented as the *School Performance Profile* and that this data is the basis for ARDs-SP to determine school and principal achievement and improvement. Wright (2001) might describe the EQ agenda as a “managerialist project” (p. 278) whereby the leaders (those above the ARD-SP) have determined the ends and it is the role of managers (principals) to determine the means. Managerialism when applied to principals and schools, driven by the belief that better management should lead to better student outcomes, sees the principal’s supervisor as a conduit of government policy and in turn establishes/reinforces the manager’s ‘right to manage’ but only so far as to achieve the pre-determined ends (goals and targets) established centrally. What does appear strongly is the obsession with measuring and managing the ‘educationally mundane’ (Thomson, Lingard, and Wrigley, 2012; see also Levin, 2009; 2010). From this perspective, leadership has been largely removed from the ARD-SP role and is substantially

located at the political level (government policy) and as such “is not available for contest, modification, or adjustment to the local level” (Wright, 2001, p. 280).

All participants appeared not only to have accepted the direction of the corporate agenda, but also to have recognised that their work had been well received by principals. Unsurprisingly, the impact of the current change agenda was both recognised and accepted within both participant groups and much of the credit was allotted to what might be described as the de-cluttering of ARD-SP role and a focused improvement agenda. Vitcov and Bloom (2010) describe this as a shift away from ‘putting out fires’ (reactive management) towards an accepted responsibility for principals’ supervision (management aimed at improved instruction) and this final point as integral to a “culture committed to improving professional practice” (p. 21).

The corollary to the points made above is that the ARD role, by its very nature, has placed the ARDs-SP at the forefront of systemic change and clearly as the lead change agents in the execution of EQ’s Agenda for improvement 2011-2015 (Queensland Government, 2011). This point was articulated by one senior executive as, *“I think the ARDs, in my view, are the key leaders in the organisational change that we’re making at the moment. They’re the ones [sic] that are [the] rubber hitting the road.”* The senior executive went on to say, *“... unless we can be working closely with the individuals who are running our schools, then you don’t get system change.”* American studies by Burbach and Butler (2005), Cudeiro (2005), Hough (2011), Marzano and Waters (2009), have found that supervisors of principals are central to any successful reform effort that concerns improvements in student achievement.

### *Supervision*

There was a consistent view held by all participants and reflected in *United in our pursuit of excellence* (Queensland Government, 2011) that the role of ARD-SP was first and foremost one of supervision of principals. In terms of the organisational hierarchy of EQ, the ARD-SP role is wholly

centred around a superordinate-subordinate relationship (Walkley, 1998), whereby the ARD-SP is the superordinate and the principal is the subordinate. Supervision of principals in this light can be seen as an inspectorial role (Walkley, 1998), one that holds principals accountable for the work that they do. This view of supervision is characterised by bureaucratic intervention and economic rationalism, as the supervisor seeks to control the work done and ensures efficient work practices.

Within the theme of Supervision three sub-themes emerged and these include a differentiated model of supervision; performance conversations as the vehicle for supervision; and intervention strategies used to improve principal performance.

*Differentiated supervision.* The majority of ARD-SP participants acknowledged that the differentiated approach focused their work on the low performing schools and school performance as measured by the *School Performance Profile*. For low performing schools, they indicated they increased the frequency and intensity of their interaction with the principals in those schools. As Participant 1 commented, “...*the schools that are running well are left to continue running well, and those that are needing support or are struggling, [that] is where you spend most of your time.*”

Participant 17 commented, “*ARDs tend to be where there is the greatest need for improved performance.*” Recognising the prevailing view of differentiated supervision the participant also stated, “*So with the schools that I focus on, there would be more regular visits. There would be stronger conversations with principals about what they are doing and what I would like to see them do, and when they would need to have that done by,*” and went on to predict, “*there will be schools that I will visit once this year. There will be schools that I will visit a dozen times.*” Highlighted in the participant comments above is the view concurrently held by all, that ARDs-SP play an interventionist role for those schools that they perceive require a significant lift in performance and that the intervention is delivered as increased supervision of the principal as described above. In this light ARD-SP intervention can be construed as top down and authoritarian. The comments raise a potential

concern in that they highlight Kreisberg's (1992) view of an authoritarian leadership approach, one that empowers the supervisor at the expense of the supervised, that is to say, an approach that may create winners and losers and one in which relationships may be put at risk (Smeed, Kimber, Millwater and Ehrich, 2009; see also Roelle, 2010).

Corporate managerialism is embedded in the notion of ARD-SP supervision as the universal legitimacy of efficiency (Apelt and Lingard, 1993) and sees EQ seeking to control the work done by principals and as an outcome ensuring efficient work practices in schools. The ideology of managerialism establishes the rationale for ARD-SP intervention which in this case sees the obedience of the managed as required by the manager as the means to the organisation increasing its efficiency and competitiveness (Wright, 2001).

*Performance conversations.* Overwhelmingly all ARD-SP participants saw their conversations with the principal as an instrumental point of leverage in the systems *Agenda for improvement 2011-2015* (Queensland Government, 2011). The following quotations illustrate the centrality of the performance conversation or feedback to the principal from the ARD-SP. As Participant 1 stated, *"Feedback is the most important part of the role...the critical point of change is the quality of feedback the principal gets, about how to move forward and why they need to move forward."*

Performance conversations with principals as forming a substantial and critical part of the ARD-SP' job was endorsed by both senior executives. In reference to conversations they expected to have with ARDs-SP as part of the normal reporting processes, one senior executive referred to the ARD-SP as the *"eyes and ears of the system."* This comment was made in the context of *"getting cohesion across all 1250 ... schools in the state...everybody focused in the same direction, everybody measured and focused on improvement...."* The senior executive went on to say, *"The Assistant Regional Director's job is to know how that school is going [performing] ... [and] to be the external*



*conversation with the principal,” and noted, “the supervisor [ARD-SP] is to work with the principal on their performance development plan.”*

Underscored by comments made by all of the participants was a focus on the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of the principal’s performance. Moreover, all participants indicated that performance feedback was to focus on the *School Performance Profile* data and the extensive use of performance criteria and target setting. These findings lend support to a burgeoning view of the ARD-SP role as a corporate manager (Lingard, Hayes and Mills, 2000; Marginson, 1993).

*Intervention.* ARD-SP participants were clear that their role required them to intervene with principals and schools specifically in regard to performance. Support for the view that intervention was triggered by poor or low performance was consistent within the participant group. As Participant 10 explained:

*What we're really saying is that there will be schools that have a somewhat lower level of intervention from me and there will be schools that would have a higher level of intervention in terms of my presence.*

In reference to those low performing schools that required ARD-SP intervention, Participant 9 stated, “...*I will mandate what needs to happen in a school, particularly if it's not only poor performing, but the leadership at the school has, over time, ... not demonstrated the capacity to shift.*” This quote in addition to others included earlier illustrate a “classic authoritarian style in which ... the ‘rules of the game’ are fairly clear ... Transactions tend to be formalised ... Negotiation is minimal...” (Blase and Anderson, 1995, p. 17).

Overall, a well-supported but not unanimous view held by participants, was that ARDs-SP intervened to varying extents in all schools. However, the type, intensity, and frequency of intervention depended on school and principal performance and varied from direct and explicit, in the

case of low and/or failing-to-improve school performance, to negotiated and agreed in the case of high and/or improved school performance. A revealing comment about managing a principal's performance was made by Participant 4, "...*the challenge of underperformance by somebody and how you manage that to a process where the person moves on when they haven't been able to meet the role. That's probably the biggest challenge that I face....*" And similarly reflective of the challenge of managing underperformance by principals was made by Participant 2 who commented, "*I think the pain of leaving that unaddressed is far greater than any pain or uncomfortable feeling that you might have talking to somebody about it.*"

Based on participants' comments, interventions seemed to be characterised as focused, direct, and explicit and with little room for principal negotiation in the management of their performance. In some instances, performance management of principals was presented as 'business as usual,' however, it was also apparent that managing unsatisfactory performance of principals was a cause for consternation among every ARDs-SP. Senior executives were of the view that challenging underperformance by principals was an integral part of the ARD-SP role in order to improve the system's performance.

### *Professional challenges*

Two key professional challenges in the role were evident from discussions with the ARD-SP participants. These included the supervisory focus of the role versus capacity building of the principal; and the ARD – principal relationship.

*ARD-SP role focus.* It was clearly established by all the ARD-SP participants that their role was designed and articulated to them as one of supervision only and that this was a specific view of supervision that implied that the development of principals, often expressed as capacity building, was not articulated as a feature of their work. The ARDs-SP commented that either during their interview for the position and/or the induction conducted by senior EQ executives that followed, it was made

clear to them that their prime responsibility was supervising principals. This responsibility indicated that overseeing principal's performance was inherent in the role while responsibility for capacity building or principal's development lay outside the role. Comments by ARDs-SP illustrate this, for example, Participant 2 stated that the role "... *separated supervision of the principal from capability development ... to provide a sharper focus [on] accountability ... school improvement and performance.*" Views expressed by all ARD participants in this regard reflected a very traditional top down view of the notion of supervision. Construed as predominantly summative, it would appear that supervision of principals was interpreted by each ARD participant as traditional managerial evaluation of practice and as such is aligned to the removal of underperforming employees (Pollock and Ford, 2009).

Noteworthy were the comments by senior executives. One senior executive commented, "*What we wanted to do was separate the concept of supervision and capability building.*" The second senior executive elaborated:

*The supervisor doesn't necessarily tell the principal what to do. Their job is to have the conversation and point out where, perhaps, from a system's perspective, the principal may not think there needs to be an improvement, but when you're looking at what our targets are across the system, there is an area for improvement.*

The senior executive then went on to explain, "*They [the ARD-SP] would be the one to facilitate the principal being able to get access to coaches, mentors, training programs, visiting other schools to get new ideas.*"

In attempting to understand the question of *supervision*, seen historically as eliminating ineffective employees and improving the school/system as a whole, senior executives have distanced the formative, cooperative and improvement aspects of supervision. Instead they have imbued a summative, evaluative and accountability aspect of supervision (Pollock and Ford, 2009). Comments by senior executives on one hand support ARD-SP participant' views of their role as more aligned to

an historical interpretation of supervision; managing or removing weak employees and on the other hand support a more contemporary view of supervision one that sees it as formative, that is to say focused on improving practice (Pollock and Ford, 2009), and cooperative (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 1993).

That the system has seemingly succeeded in focusing the ARD-SP role primarily on the supervision of principals (not their development) is reflected in the statements by all participants and as a position supported in *United in our pursuit of excellence* (Queensland Government, 2011) when it states “development of principals’ leadership skills will be supported through a variety of models, resources, and approaches across the system” and that the ARD’s role is to “moderate the supervision and support for principals to develop collective capacity and ensure consistency of practice” (p. 2).

Yet the division between the supervisory role and the developmental role caused concern for every ARDs-SP and this was reflected in their comments about their day-to-day interactions with the principals whom they supervise. For example, Participant 2 conceded, “*Supporting principals in their development is a challenge when you’re the supervisor and you’re not in the capability space any longer is a challenge.*” In this instance the challenge emanated from Participant 2’s desire to provide capability development to principals yet recognising that this was not part of the ARD-SP role as was articulated and commonly understood.

In contrast, Participant 5 indicated that although not part of their official role, that they were involved in developing principals: “*So while we really try and steer clear of the coaching, in many ways lots of our work in these remote communities is leading, is coaching, is supporting, and is supervising.*” The challenge in separating the supervisory role and mentoring role revealed in this participant’s comment relates to provision of capability development to principals with the recognition that this was not considered part of the ARD-SP role.

Another strong indication of the degree of challenge when separating the two roles came from Participant 17 when they made clear, “*A lot of the conversations [with principals]... go significantly*

*beyond what would be considered by the system as the boundaries of, or the requirements of, the ARD role. So, whilst it's a supervisory role, the reality is, a lot of conversation [with principals] is about advice or guidance."* One participant cautioned that taking the capacity building out of the role is problematic and said:

*... the risk in our system, if you take it [capability development] away from the individual ARD role, is that what I think will happen is that the focus of ARD's tends to be mostly where there is greatest need for improvement in performance ... [for those] who require the highest levels of intervention and supervision.*

Participant 17 went on to question, *"focusing on the lowest performers ... then what are you actually doing to continue to grow the capacity of the organisation by stretching your high performers? Well, you tend to be leaving them alone. So I think that's a fundamental flaw in the system."* This position resonates with other participants' views that support the idea of the ARD-SP role as prioritised towards intervention with those principals perceived to be poor or non-performing principals. As Participant 1 proclaimed, *"I've nailed it with the average to the at-risk principals, I believe, but I really haven't given the top flyers enough time and constructive feedback."*

In line with the idea that not all principals receive ARD-SP 'support', as alluded to above, an interesting view and possible explanation was offered by one senior executive who stated:

*some people [principals] need to be supervised one on one and that's how they build their capacity. Other people [principals] will actually learn from each other and it's about having focus groups where everybody comes to the table ... put our strategies on the table, put our learnings on the table and we learn from each other.*

This comment reinforced the perception of the different needs of principals, where some require ARD-SP intervention, and others do not. The shift in responsibility for principals' capability

development away from the ARD-SP was also illustrated in comments made by both senior executives as they set forth that it was the principal who established his or her own capability needs and established the benchmarks for his or her own improvement. Well established also was the idea that the target of capability development for the principal should lie specifically within the immediate performance deficit of the individual school.

### *Professional Relationships*

Another professional challenge that all ARD-SP participants shared related to their relationship with principals and how central they saw that relationships were to their performance and success in the role. Among the ARD-SP participants, the view that relationships were an important aspect of the role was universal. Participants also commented however that there was tension between building productive relationships with principals on the one hand and the huge work demands on the other. These work demands included the limited time available and the large number of schools/principals each ARD-SP supervised. There was also the recognition by every ARDs-SP that principals wanted to develop a good working relationship with them. Brady's (1993) research found this to be the case as a common focus and collaborative relationships were key elements of the successful supervision of principals that then led to shared decisions and mutual growth for the supervisor (ARD-SP) and principal. This point was echoed by Lambert (2007, p. 322), who acknowledged that "bureaucratic limitations put education at risk."

This portrayal of parsimonious human resourcing at the ARD level further supports a corporate managerialist view of education, one that sees a very narrow, top-down, data-driven agenda, driven into schools in an attempt to improve efficiency, accountability, raise standards, and competitiveness (Davies and Bansel, 2007; Ravitch, 2011; Wright, 2001). The implication was that improved management practice at every level of the organisation would lead to improved school performance. The underpinning notion of traditional top down supervision characterised by strong system accountability and eliminating poor performance was at odds with many of the views

expressed by both groups of participants, who used language more closely aligned to relational and supportive supervision (Pollock and Ford, 2009; Sergiovanni and Starratt, 1993).

All of the ARDs-SP referred to the importance of building and maintaining good relationships with principals. While they indicated they used a variety of communicative strategies to maintain contact and communicate with principals (i.e. telephone, email, videoconference, group meetings), each made clear the importance of face-to-face meetings with principals. As Participant 18 stated, *“it’s very hard to have a relationship with someone you haven’t met [in person].”*

Participant 10 described their approach to the role of ARD-SP as *“winning the hearts and minds [of principals]”* hence saw their supervision of principals as *“first and foremost, it’s a relationship.”* Participant 19 declared, *“The relationships [with principals] are absolutely everything. You need to build that trust and rapport.”* Participant 16 stated, *“Relationships are vital ... in terms of being professional. They need to be positive even in cases where there are performance concerns. Relationships need to be absolutely professional.”* In support of the critical importance of the ARD-SP-principal relationship, one senior executive stated, *“So relationship wise, I don’t think you [the ARD] need to be the best friend, but you need to be someone who’s open, got good interpersonal [skills], who knows how to respond to the principal when they are actually baring their weaknesses.”*

Central to developing a relationship that supports successful supervision of principals is time spent gaining and sharing experiences about educational practices and specific school situations (Brady, 1993). Kowalski (2005) also emphasised the positive impact of principal-supervisor relationships on school culture and productivity. As has been successfully argued elsewhere, teachers cannot create and sustain conditions for the improved learning of students if those conditions do not exist for teachers (Harris and Chapman, 2002; Silns and Mulford, 2002); the same can be argued for the conditions between principals and their supervisors. This point has been successfully argued in numerous other studies (Burbach and Butler, 2005; Butler, 2014; Cudeiro, 2005; Hough, 2011; Marzano and Waters, 2009) whereby the supervisor’s positive relationship with principals was seen as central to the principal leading their school effectively.

## Discussion and Conclusion

From this study, ARD-SP leadership may be construed as predominantly enhanced line-management of principals; leading, managing and supervising others to ensure their effective performance (Simkins, 2005). The question now arises is this a traditional inspector's role that has been given a new leadership spin? Individuals located in ARD-SP roles have delegated authority predicated on the hierarchical structure of the organisation. They are expected to manage principals (as subordinates) who in turn are intended to manage others (teachers, paraprofessionals, students) and manage resources in order to deliver efficient and effective performance of their school thus contributing to the success of EQ as a whole. For all ARDs-SP performance management is progressively more their *sine qua non* and in many ways represented as a conception of leadership that might be described as 'inspectorial'.

As revealed in the data there are concerns with this model – not least is the over simplification of EQ organisational complexity. These can be captured as:

- undue emphasis on formal authority based on hierarchical position, whereas professional authority depends on more complex factors;
- an over-simplified hierarchical conception whereas the reality of line management structures rarely represents organisational complexity; and,
- attempted separation of principal's supervision from principal's professional development.

These problems can be exemplified at many levels and in many kinds of educational organisations (Hellawell and Hancock, 2001; Simkins, 2005). Questions arise over the robustness of sources of authority for effectively carrying out the ARD-SP role, particularly those aligned to performance management of principals when sanctions of a positive or negative consequence are difficult to apply. Questions too arise over the authenticity of separating supervision and development, interpreted as accountability without development (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 1993; Walkley, 1998) or accountability



without capacity building the latter of which is seen as the “*sine qua non* of system reform” (Fullan, 2010, p. 71). This has previously been construed as summative evaluation of the principal’s performance and aligned to removal of underperformers (Pollock and Ford, 2009). Finally questions also arise over the clash of domain cultures, specifically managerialism versus professionalism that might otherwise be interpreted as cultures of ‘control’ (hierarchical authority of the management domain) versus cultures of ‘consent’ (collegiality and self-regulation of the service domain) (Handy, 1977; 1999; in Simkins, 2005).

The interview data strongly supported the idea that there is significant pressure for the ARD-SP to perform; more particularly it is increasingly difficult to ‘under-perform’ in any aspect of the role (Hellawell and Hancock, 2001). The role carries a clear weight of expectation in improving the organisation’s performance and as such a clear sense of ARD-SP agency or compliance is critical. In reaction to the pressure, two patterns of response can be discerned from the interview data and both see participants as having a clear sense of agency that can be expressed as compliance, either ‘willing’ or ‘strategic’ (Simkins, 2005). Willing compliers have embraced the EQ improvement agenda, its underlying values, purpose, and corporate policies whilst strategic compliers have found ways to reconstruct or accommodate policy so that they maintain their core values despite their discomfort and the policy pressure. The role of ARD-SP was relatively new at the time of this research however the context of EQ or more broadly education bureaucracy and its impact on individual agency are not. Although little evidence of ‘unwilling compliers’ (Simkins, 2005) was found based on comments provided by ARDs-SP, the potential for this response should not be dismissed as where there is power there is always resistance (Kreisberg, 1992).

The role of the ARD-SP in EQ organisational life places them in a dynamic and potentially conflicted policy environment (Simkins, 2005) and at the confluence of significant pressures to do with power, authority, and control. This arises from conceptions of their authority, organisational complexity around their position, and conceptions of their role as predominantly accountability

driven. A prejudice towards dissatisfaction with institutional performance, the current neo-liberal leadership paradigm, sees those leading educational institutions also charged with balancing the political tensions. The complexities and ambiguity inherent within and without the organisation and their corporate management context renders ARD-SP leadership problematic (Glatter and Kydd, 2003).

This study aimed to understand how Assistant Regional Directors – School Performance in Queensland, those actors charged with the supervision of school principals, construed their leadership role in light of the Education Queensland's improvement agenda. It contributed in part to the small body of research in the field of executive leadership.

Notwithstanding this, there were two main limitations of this study. First, the research focused on Assistant Regional Directors of public education within one State of Australia. For this reason, the findings need to be treated with caution and not necessarily viewed as transferable across different contexts and countries. With this said, however, it appears that the predominantly strong supervisory role discussed by the participants in the study is a finding that may have relevance to similar types of positions in other contexts. Based on research regarding superintendents across 13 countries, Nir (2014) concludes that control is a feature of the role and what makes the role differ is the degree to which control and/or trust within supervision is apparent. He explains that control is understood in situations where superintendents exercise compliance by close monitoring and through exercising their formal authority, while trust occurs when superintendents act as facilitators in the supervision of principals and allow them more opportunity for autonomy (Nir, 2014). A key contribution of the current study, then, was that all Assistant Regional Directors in Queensland claimed they used a differentiated supervision model: they indicated they used either compliance or more trusting strategies such as facilitation depending on the level of school performance.

Although 90% of the ARD- SP cohort in Queensland participated in the research, a limitation is that the study relied heavily on the ARD-SPs interviews. Future research, then, could be carried out with similarly placed leaders not only in public education systems but also independent and Catholic schooling systems of other states and territories within Australia to determine consistency both in policy position and role description to the ARD-SP in Queensland. Moreover, school principals' views could be investigated in relation to their experience of working with ARD-SPs in Queensland. Another focus for future research would be to conduct case studies that utilise not only interviews with ARD-SPs and school principals, but also draw upon school performance data. School performance data could be used to further provide contextual information regarding the schools for which ARDs-SP oversee. Given that so little research has been carried out on executive leaders working within schooling hierarchies in Australia, it is argued that future research is both essential and timely.

Despite these limitations, the study has illustrated the inextricable link between schooling success and international economic competitiveness (a contention supported by international data) and predicates that the well-established history of government intervention in education is set to continue in Australia. As Davies and Bansel (2007) state, "Economic productivity is seen to come not from government investment in education, but from transforming education into a product that can be bought and sold like anything else" (p. 254). The neo-liberal inspired perception of an underperforming public education system drives the Queensland education reform agenda thereby legitimising marketisation and the commodification of education and the introduction of competition between schools and students.

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